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# Challenges Regarding the Combating of Roma Child Labor via Education in Romania and the Need for Child-centered Roma Policies

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### Abstract

Roma children are a social group with a history of accumulated disadvantages. Even if child labor is not something experienced by Roma children, due to the level of poverty and exclusion there is a greater risk that Roma children will enter the world of labor at an early stage. Such labor would principally include seasonal work in agriculture, in construction, collection of recyclable materials, and household work.

At present, education and child labor are mostly regarded as separate issues in today's Romania.

The paper aims to make a contribution to bridging the gap between the issues of Roma child labor and education, and to creating a space for a search for solutions, i.e. possibilities thrown up in the course of this research. It advances the argument that in order to combat Roma child labor there is a need for governmental policies related to quality education provision.

The paper is based on a double level of research: 1) at the grassroots level, aiming to explore Roma children and their families' own perspectives on children's work and schooling; 2) at an institutional level, aiming to frame the current level/degree of child labor policies and make consequent policy recommendations.

The potential policy solutions the paper proposes are an improved quality of education; employment opportunities in communities with a high risk of exclusion and poverty; and community mobilization and awareness raising campaigns to challenge the social acceptability of child labor both for Roma and the majority population.

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The views contained inside remain solely those of the author who may be contacted at [pantea@policy.hu](mailto:pantea@policy.hu). For a fuller account of this policy research project, please visit [www.policy.hu/pantea/](http://www.policy.hu/pantea/).

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# 1 Introduction

According to an uncompromising definition of child labor used by one of the leading international organizations<sup>1</sup>, potentially “any child out of school is a child laborer”, because sooner or later he/she will be involved in a certain type of work. This definition encompasses every non-school-going child, irrespective of whether the child is engaged in wage or non-wage work, working for the family or for others, employed in hazardous or non-hazardous occupations, employed on daily wages or on a contract basis as bonded labor. Children’s rights are not negotiated.

At the moment, in Romania there is no statistical evidence to document the link between education and child labor (for neither Roma or the majority population). Consequently, ); so I do think that the above definition, even if contentious, is able to satisfy the needs of a research project that aims to bridge the gap between education and work.

Far from being an apolitical issue, in Romania and also in many other East European countries, child labor is rarely addressed. Many times, political agendas are attached to the topic, and its existence is often concealed or ‘manipulated’. Child labor is not a concept with public recognition and it is rarely tackled as a cause for school dropouts or for low performance. However, in spite of a relative lack of official concern, child labor is an emerging phenomenon in today’s Romania, whose total population of children is approximately 4 million.

Child labor is not a practice of Roma children only. Many children from the majority population are also working. Still, statistics on the incidence of child labor are debatable, going from 70.690 (according to the National Institute of

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<sup>1</sup> This definition belongs to the MV Foundation, based in India. The most acknowledged definition is the one used by UNICEF, which will be presented in the next chapter. However, not all child laborers drop out of school; and there is also the phenomenon of “idle children” (neither at school, nor working), who do risk entering child labor. Both the UNICEF definition and the phenomenon of idle children will be discussed later on in the paper.



Statistics<sup>2</sup>) to 300 000 (according to individual economic estimates<sup>3</sup> and to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions<sup>4</sup>). The official statistics allow for limited international comparison, as the definitions used, differ to some extent from international ones. As no ethnic-based data is provided on child labor, there are no statistical arguments available with which one can speak about Roma child labor as a distinctive problem. There are, however, other indicators that may justify a focus on Roma ethnicity. Below, I will introduce some data on Roma, which enables us to see as reasonably valid, the topic of concern.

According to the National Census [2002], there are 535.140 Roma in Romania, accounting for 2.5% of the total population. However, the number is prone to various biases, as Roma group membership is defined by self-identification, while ethnic identity itself is contextual and hard to define. What is more important are the generational dynamics inside the Roma minority in Romania. Whereas for the general population 19.2% are children aged below 14 years, for the Roma minority more than 34% is made up of children below this age [CASPIIS, 2002]. In addition, compared to other countries from Eastern Europe, Romania has the highest percentage of families with four or more children [CASPIIS, 2002].

Children are definitely a large part of the Roma ethnic group. What Roma children actually do, matters in the inner structures of their communities and, more generally, in the dynamics of Romanian society as a whole. At present, despite an increasing tendency for school attendance, Roma enrolment in primary and secondary education is still 25%, and is 30% lower than the national rate. 17.3% of Roma children aged 7-16 have never experienced any

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<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Statistics and ILO, 2003, *Ancheta asupra activitatii copiilor. Raport National*, Bucharest.

<sup>3</sup> C. Ghinararu, 2004, *Child labor in Romania*, under the auspices of the Romanian Ministry of Work, Social Solidarity and the Family, The United States Department of Labor and UNICEF Romania, at [http://www.unicef.org/romania/Child\\_labor.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/romania/Child_labor.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Report for the WTO General Council, Review of the Trade Policies of Romania (Geneva, 28 and 30 November 2005). At <http://www.icftu.org>.

form of education<sup>5</sup>. According to governmental sources<sup>6</sup>, 80% of children from the Roma population live in poverty, out of which 43.3% dwell in conditions of severe poverty.

The subsistence economy, unemployment and discrimination have excluded many Roma families. Child labor has been a survival strategy for many of them, an alternative to school failure for others, and a deliberate choice when a “promise of success through education” went astray.

In spite of the fact that a child out of school risks being drawn into the world of work, education and child labor are regarded mostly as separate issues in Romania. In the literature, except for a few specialized studies [S.Cace, M. Surdu], Roma children are invisible members of their communities. Therefore, as Roma children are a social group with a history of accumulated disadvantages it becomes legitimate to explore the relationship they have with education and work – and how the two relate to each other - in order to make policy recommendations which address their *particular* needs.

### *Definition of the policy problem*

Child labor is notoriously difficult to define and (arguably) culturally bound. ILO and UNICEF have developed categories<sup>7</sup> to distinguish between *light work* (children’s participation in economic activity that does not negatively affect their health or development or interfere with their education, and which can be positive), *child labor* (children of below 12 years of age working in any economic sphere, those aged 12 to 14 years who are engaged in harmful work, and all children engaged in the worst forms of child labor) and the *worst forms of child labor* (referring to children being enslaved, forcibly recruited, made to enter prostitution, trafficked, forced to do illegal activities and exposed to hazardous work).

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<sup>5</sup> PROject of Technical assistance against the Labor and Sexual Exploitation of Children, including Trafficking, in Countries of the CEE, 2005, Romania. Country Situation, at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/protectcee/countryprofiles.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> CASPIS (National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Commission) cited by ILO IPEC.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, Cf. ILO Convention No. 138/ 1973.

However, the borders between the above categories are difficult to establish. Many times, the work children do and the time they spend working may be outside the delineations laid out above. Seeing where one ends and another begins may often be problematic. Consequently, it seems more realistic to regard them as a continuum, from the light and positive forms to the most dangerous types [White, 1994, 1996]. The definition of child labor used for the purpose of this particular study is “every form of paid or unpaid work which prevents children from having a quality education, while jeopardizing their development and health<sup>8</sup>” [Lieten and White, 2001]. Its main advantage is that it is able to take on board the two dimensions of interest here: work (or labor)<sup>9</sup> and education.

There are different positions one might take with reference to children’s work: from the extremely protectionist discourses considering work “a pathology of childhood”<sup>10</sup>, to a more liberal approach, which sees work as a right that cannot be denied to children. Yet one should distinguish between the different realities - and the concept of “work” applied.

M. Myer’s [2001] argument is helpful in understanding the different meanings of “work” for different children. In many developed countries, most of the children who work do so while being motivated by a “consumerist” need to be able to purchase goods, to gain a sense of responsibility or in order to enrich their experiences.

Nevertheless, many Roma children work in a context of deep deprivation and with a scarcity of alternatives. They cannot choose the nature or the duration of their work (full time/ part time/ evening hours etc.). For many of them, work is often an essential part of their lives - not a transitory or contextual practice to be used for a specific purpose. The debate around the

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<sup>8</sup> Though this paper will not enter into great detail with reference to issues like prostitution or external trafficking, which require a separate approach.

<sup>9</sup> As the boundaries between “work” and “labor” are, to a large extent, ambiguous, I will use these terms interchangeably, though not without acknowledging the limitations of this approach. Still, the paper will make it explicit when referring to “light” work.

<sup>10</sup> Comments developed by B. White in ‘Defining the intolerable. Children’s work, global standards and cultural relativism’, (1999), 6 *Childhood*, 133–144.

value of work for future life achievements is inadequate when work points to school failure or dropping out. This paper acknowledges the value of work, yet condemns work that prevents children from receiving a decent education. Ultimately, Roma child labor is about work that puts education at risk.

### *Statement of intent*

The paper here aims to contribute at bridging the gap between the issue of Roma child labor and education, and to draw attention to a problem that is part of a taken for-granted social reality in Romania. It hopes to do more than merely raise awareness and cause a sterile form of indignation. It wants to create an area in which one might search for rational solutions (as informed by this research). The main guiding principle is that children's rights are not to be negotiated.

The paper advances the argument that in order to combat child labor among Roma, there is a need for governmental policies dealing with quality education and employment. The paper argues, however, that one should not be deceived by a view of education as a panacea for all social and economic ills [Fyfe in Lieten and White, 2001] and advocates broader policy recommendations for community development.

### *Methodology and limitations of the study*

This inquiry is based on a double level of research: 1) at the grassroots level, aiming to explore Roma children and their families' own perspectives on children's work and schooling; 2) at an institutional level, aiming to frame the current level/degree of child labor policies and make consequent policy recommendations. The paper will assess the successes and failures of central and local initiatives to encourage school attendance and to eliminate Roma child labor.

The policy recommendations are based on in-depth interviews and participant observations with children. The age of involved children was 8 to 15 years. Parents, Roma leaders and teaching staff from six communities were interviewed. The paper is based on fieldwork research that illustrates the social practices that involve child labor. It takes on board the subjective

dimension of work as experienced by children and also the structural constraints that keep Roma working children on the margins of social concern. These are all areas that have hardly been touched upon up until now in Romania.

The communities informing the fieldwork are<sup>11</sup>:

- F., a suburban community from Transylvania, with children working as daily 'employees' at a poultry farm, collecting recycled metals from the close city or extracting and selling sand from a nearby river.
- B., a Roma-related group called "Rudari", living near the Danube. They identify their ethnicity as being "in between" Roma and majority population and tend to hold onto traditional practices despite a high degree of mobility inside the country and, more recently, abroad. Their main work is agriculture, namely the cultivation and trading of watermelons in different cities of the country via seasonal migration. There are situations in which Roma boys are hired to do work on a daily or monthly basis. Girls are married at age of 13-14 years, and there is strong pressure for married girls to perform domestic chores for the groom's family, which is to be associated with restrictive mobility and controlled social relations, school dropout and functional illiteracy.
- P., a semi-traditional Roma community living in close proximity to a national highway linking two cities from Transylvania. There is a relative mobility of community members and, consequently, greater income potential. The main activities of children include occasional work for wealthier Romanian and Hungarian families, extracting and selling sand from a river, and berry gathering.
- Ba., a rural community of 1200 members from Transylvania, representing one third of a relatively large and isolated village, with few and expensive transportation means to any city. The community has a short history, being formed during communism, owing to the agricultural potential of the region. Without any further employment opportunities and due to a 30% illiteracy rate, the Roma here have remained highly dependent on social security benefits. The humanitarian assistance from religious leaders and limited social programs have divided the community. There is a low school attendance rate, even if the school is close by. There are low expectations for the future,; while the few persons who have graduated from vocational/technical schools in the city are now back home, unemployed.
- R. neighborhood, an urban extremely poor mixed community in a city from Transylvania. Differences between poor and excluded Romanians, Hungarians and Roma tend to be small. School attendance is relatively high, but with few children attending vocational or high schools

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<sup>11</sup> For the confidentiality of informants, the paper does not use the names of communities or the (real) names of persons.

afterwards. There is a high teenage pregnancy rate and a phenomenon of children's idleness (children who are neither in school nor working). There is no homogeneity of occupations that children here might resort to – for they vary from domestic work, seasonal work in farms outside the city or collecting recyclable materials (metal and paper) to replacing parents in the community work they have to perform so as to get social benefits. 'Professional aspirations' for both boys and girls are limited.

- Interviews with Roma children from a developed city of Transylvania, who sell newspapers at the local crossroads or aromatic plants. They are older girls from the orphanage, now living independently (at a deplorable night center); or they come from neighboring villages to sell plants (a job they consider to be on the border of begging).

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It is difficult to represent Roma diversity in terms of region, level of traditionalism, occupation, levels of education, or views on the value of school and work. Even if there are some exceptions, child labor appears to be a community<sup>12</sup> practice rather than the family's choice. Still, there are variations within the Roma 'communities' themselves, ones that may ultimately lead to types of segregation inside the same 'community'.

Choices with regard to education are often social markers: one Roma community may criticize another for not sending their children to school or for keeping them in deplorable situations, while another will have an opposite point of view. According to many Roma leaders, new power relations within Roma communities have been generated by local political leaders or religious missionaries. In these circumstances, speaking about 'Roma communities' may bring the risk of oversimplification.

The majority of the selected 'communities' are from Transylvania, the region with the highest population of Roma<sup>13</sup>. The most traditional communities (in terms of occupation, language and customs - like the Gabori, Kalderari and Cortorari) have not been included in this study. I thought that, in

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<sup>12</sup> There are, definitely, major dilemmas about "what makes a community". Some criteria serving to define "community" are ethnicity- and residency-based.

<sup>13</sup> National Institute of Statistics, Population by Ethnic Groups, in the Population and Housing Census, March 18, 2002, at [http://www.insse.ro/index\\_eng.htm](http://www.insse.ro/index_eng.htm) [last date accessed: 18.09.06].

many respects, these groups have been more successful in 'finding their way' in post-communist times. Their situations have already been looked at in anthropological research. There are, however, problematic practices that may justify a research in its own right. My knowledge regarding these most traditional social groups of Roma is limited, however. They represent a small minority now in Romania.

The research was undertaken with a concern for ethical issues. Roma working children experience many forms of discrimination and vulnerability. The research process aimed to empower Roma working children who have a marginal position due to a combination of factors - including ethnicity, age, gender, poverty and, at times, disability. The main idea underlying the fieldwork is that it is misleading and unfair to understand Roma children as powerless victims of actual situations that they are living in. Apart from the structural constraints that shape their lives, one should acknowledge a child's own 'agency' and also their capacity to make sense of the world they live in and their ability to talk about how they understand both work and education.

## 2 Problem Description

### *2.1 The legacy of the past*

During communism, egalitarian policies promoted free education, housing and employment, for Roma too. In the cities, Roma lived in mixed communities, and there were no major discrepancies in living standards in comparison with the majority population, where persons had several children. Even if unemployed, Roma from the countryside had an opportunity to work in agriculture or doing a cooperative handicraft (although some traditional occupations were restricted in later communist years). Policies of engaging Roma in unskilled jobs amounted to little more than a proletarianization [Pogany, 2004]

Now, almost half of Roma live in the countryside, though only 23.8% own land and 41.4% have a garden. In these circumstances, the only sources of income are sporadic and poorly-paid day labor and, not rarely, stealing [CASPI, 2002]. Many of the families who lived in the cities had to sell their apartments because of the impossibility of paying the living costs. Many moved into marginalized and often overcrowded neighborhoods. Living in compact settlements, Roma families reinforced social practices that had been played down under communism. Child labor is one such phenomenon.

Under these circumstances, one can possibly speak about a trend of re-traditionalisation for part of the Roma population. Children's levels of education are lower than those of their parents [ICCV, 1998] and the social and economic 'distance' from the Roma families who have managed to stay in the initially mixed neighborhoods is increasing. Many of the more recent success stories coming via education, for example, are related to children dwelling in mixed communities <sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Newly-formed communities may also be ethnically mixed, and have extremely poor and also excluded families (excluded from the majority population). Their social practices (including child labor and education) are, to a certain extent, similar.



## 2.2 *The current situation and children's own opinions about work*

On the whole, the phenomenon of child labor in Romania does not resemble the industrial forms more often associated with Victorian England or with today's textile industry in Southern Asia<sup>15</sup>. In the main, it refers to children who combine a (limited) school attendance with working on small family farms<sup>16</sup>. For the majority population it is not school attendance but school *performance* that is affected by work. School dropout makes an appearance at a later stage, being a cause of low educational achievement due to work undertaken and/or another situation (poverty, family crises, there being no school nearby etc.).

For the Roma population the situation is more critical. Whereas majority population children are more likely to work their *own* land, together with the family, Roma households are poorer, so children will need to seek work further afield. Given this fact, the risks of exploitation and abuse are much higher for them.

Besides seasonal work in agriculture, Roma children (especially boys) are working in constructions, even if, legally, children's work in construction is not acceptable below the age of 16. Working at heights, being exposed to toxic substances and the multiple disadvantages that come from being Roma, young and 'the least qualified' member of the team, all make them a particular vulnerable social category.

The collection of recyclable materials (paper and, especially, metal) from public spaces but also from soil, water and garbage gives children a social stigma and also has a health risk [Fassa, 2000]. At home, many children do child-care and/or domestic work. Depending on age, boys might also do such work.

Evidence related to the health consequences of child labor is poor [Scanlon, 2002; Hesketh, 2006]. There are few large-scale, longitudinal

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<sup>15</sup> There is, though, evidence that the vast majority of child laborers, worldwide, work in agriculture [Boyden et al., 1998].

<sup>16</sup> According to official data, almost 90% of total child laborers from Romania, work in agriculture [NIS, 2003].

studies, and there are many methodological problems to be overcome. The direction of causality is difficult to establish. One cannot estimate, for instance, to what extent work damages the health of child laborers or whether the fact is that children who enter the world of work tend to have a poor health condition anyway [OECD, 2003]

Thus, Roma working children speak about the physical and psychological harm caused by excessive work and improper conditions. Physically, they may be injured by exposure to dangerous substances (for example lime burns in construction or by inhaling dust and toxins at a chicken farm), working at heights, in an accident with a car (for children who wash cars or sell newspapers at crossroads), by heavy lifting, sunstroke (for children working in agriculture) plus unhealthy sleeping and living conditions (for those who sell water melons in cities, close to a main road and in the open, without security measures and being exposed to bad weather). Low nutrition, poor hygiene and irregular sleeping hours when at work are also among their more tacit complaints. If attending school, teachers refer to working children's fatigue and their low ability to concentrate.

Psychologically, working children tend to have ambivalent feelings about themselves. On the one hand, some are proud of being able to do more than majority-population children do (especially if they work in construction, in agriculture or farming, which involves heavy workloads). Parents may also accept a more emancipated form of behavior from children who contribute to the family's income. On the other hand, children may also internalize a depreciatory feeling of being different from their peers who are not working. Girls' domestic work is less socially visible, it may lead to emotional burnout and a sense of alienation.

Children working for an 'employer' are more exposed to mistreatment and neglect, which could generate emotional disorders (higher tolerance of abuses and a low ability to express feelings). 'Employers' do not act *in loco parentis* and children internalize what the employer considers to be typically adult behavior (smoking, drinking, even visits to prostitutes). In many cases, child labor could open the door to a premature adulthood and anti-social behavior (e.g. children who collect metal may steal iron or even enter into a metal-stealing network).

The main reasons why a person may offer a job to a child are manifold. In agriculture, children of above 13-14 years can obtain the same amount of money as their parents, and during the agricultural season parents and children would like to make use of this opportunity. Sometimes the “employer” may believe he/she is helping the child and the family (the employer is a relative, a neighbor or an old family acquaintance). There are, also, situations when an intention to exploit the child, driven by economic profit-making, is explicit:

*“I took this one for 3.5 millions lei [equivalent of 100 Euro] for 2 months, from his parents. He’s 12 and he was with me last year also. He’s very deft and quick [...]; he has another brother of 16, but I didn’t take him - he’s lazier, is always asking for money to go into the city, and smokes too much...[smiling]” [Man, Rudar<sup>17</sup>, 35, watermelon seller].*

There are also situations where employers notice from previous contact with the child that he/she meets the ‘criteria’ for being employed: he/she is serious, active, responsible, compliant, has the necessary physical abilities, is poor, and the family is not concerned about their school or work. School dropout may occur once the child has been offered a job (working at a center for collecting recyclable materials, for a store owner or a market seller).

Children who work in a seemingly formal way (as newspaper sellers, being ‘employed’ by a reputable printing house), or at a chicken farm, for instance, will display a high level of confidence in their employers - despite the fact that some conflicts may also occur

*I sell newspapers, even if I am only 12... I told my employer that I’m 20, because I look like I’m 20 - and he believed me! [Maria, 12, newspaper seller for 1 year].*

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<sup>17</sup> Rudar is a branch of Roma ethnicity.

*He (the employer) promised to help me get a high school diploma. He knows somebody who knows somebody...*  
 [Catalin, 17, newspaper seller for 5 years].

Not all children out of school are working. There is also a big phenomenon of “idle” children (being neither at school nor in work). Their families/neighborhoods are extremely poor, and have no work opportunities. Often families are often ignorant - and do not see school as a solution. Many do not see any solutions at all. If they do think about possibilities, these will be via state initiatives to create work openings where unqualified jobs can be performed without education.

In the same time, schools are not actually making any effort to reach these Roma children. For various reasons, offered programs (summer pre-primary courses, classes in the Romani language or ‘second chance’ classes) are undertaken by few Roma, while many other children from the same community have never even entered a classroom.

In the worst scenario, “idle” children may run a high risk of entering the worst forms of child labor (e.g. criminal activities, trafficking, prostitution). In extreme situations, some Roma families also practice child-trafficking themselves<sup>18</sup>. As regards external trafficking, different patterns exists<sup>19</sup>:

- children migrate and work as informal and irregular migrants together with their families;
- children live abroad with a close relative, for financial gain, by involvement in small criminal activities;
- there are unaccompanied children, left abroad by their parents or other adults, who did not declare that they had children when leaving the country.

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<sup>18</sup> A relatively comparable pattern of migration can be seen with children from the Oas region (North East of Romania) in France, during the 90's. Dana Diminescu (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris) wrote extensively on the particular phenomenon of migration from Oas. The discussion of Roma migration is largely due to the grateful support received from Olivier Peyroux, Deputy Director of the Hors la Rue Association, France and Dana Diminescu.

<sup>19</sup> Rapport d'Activité 2004 de l'association Hors la Rue, at [www.horslarue.org/files/file\\_1132759873.pdf](http://www.horslarue.org/files/file_1132759873.pdf) . The pattern is largely confirmed by De Soto et. al. [2005] for Albania.

Children are used - at different ages, and in different ways - for begging: babies will be accompanied by an adult or younger children; children may beg alone or with the more distant supervision of another adult (who may be a parent or not). Professional begging may be linked to criminal networks, involving children and babies borrowed from extremely poor parents. Yet since this was seen to be a large and profitable activity for adult 'leaders', though hardly for children, a major public campaign was launched recently by Save the Children Romania, advising people not to offer money any more.

What do children think about their working lives? Talking to children about their work does not always give the uniformly depressing feeling one might expect. Children do not see work as being entirely positive or as entirely negative (the same conclusion was arrived at by A. Invernizzi, 2006, with reference to Portugal). Most do see benefits in the work they do (like seeing the city for those living in the countryside, earning money to buy "what they want", having more independence).

Still, if compared with non-Roma, Roma children are more likely to refer to the negative side of their work. Roma children living in the city are more likely to say that they enjoy opportunities to work as a means of earning money. They are not proud of working, but do "not feel ashamed" - which gives reference to their learned feeling of being disadvantaged. It is important to note that a "Western" practice of part-time jobs for youngsters is really at its very beginning here; and there is an implicit understanding that poverty is the only reason children may seek work.

Children who beg also try to define their work in terms that are more socially acceptable. Small children are more successful when begging or selling items on the streets; they and their parents know this and take advantage of it. If they are not able to make use of a visible disability, older children use petty items (sweet basil, small religious icons) to attract clients. These are things that people do not usually buy, but are used as pretexts via which to approach potential benefactors. Implicit messages speak about need - and not about the items to be sold (for which they will not request a specific price).

These children do know that they are performing on the borders of begging; though the personal strategies used for feeling better about themselves and their work are that they are not forcing people to do anything, they are mainly approaching charitable persons and, above all, they are not stealing.

One should not be deceived by children's tendency to see their working life in positive terms, however<sup>20</sup>. Living in more or less difficult situations, they (like anybody else) have a psychological need to develop internal strategies with which to accommodate their deprived positions. In these circumstances, it becomes explicable why many working children, in spite of the objectively difficult work they perform, still find their work "not hard at all", or even satisfactory, and voluntary too: "I work only when I want to and how much I want to" [Girl, 13, street newspaper seller].

Amartya. Sen [1999] looks at the same argument as one of the three limitations in utilitarian ethical theory, namely "adaptation and mental conditioning": "... deprived people tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival; and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as being feasible" [Sen, 1999: 63].

Consequently, one could argue, in Sen's terms, that working children, like any deprived social grouping, can become psychologically adjusted to a persistent deprivation. Given this, the apparently positive attitudes toward work and destitute conditions that Roma working children may have, should not be understood as a lack of sensitivity to - or, indeed, an increased resistance to deprivation.

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<sup>20</sup> This part emerged following insights given by a conversation had with Kristoffel Lieten (director of the Foundation for International Research on Working Children).

### 3 Risk Factors Inherent in Entering Child Labor

There is a complex set of economic and cultural factors that serve to generate and maintain child labor [Brown, 2001]. Despite many economic analyses, one can only examine factual correlations, but not causal relationships. The following classification is, rather, an artificial attempt to identify and organize several risk factors that are, otherwise, interrelated and difficult to categorize by themselves. Some of the factors with deeper and outside causes (like parental education, power dynamics inside family) become visible only at a household level. Such a classification is not a method of delegating responsibilities, as there are often deeper structural constraints linked to one cause or another.

One could argue that, to a certain extent, poverty actually maintains discriminatory cultural practices [Weiner, 1991; Murshed, 2001]. Ethnicity is a cross-cutting theme in the classification below. Being Roma does matter when talking about poverty, education, community and, many times, about family.

#### *3.1 Factors related to poverty*

The main reason Roma children work is to contribute to the family income. Due to extreme poverty and a high unemployment rate, a large proportion of Roma families live on child allowances and social security benefits. Even if, officially, education is free of charge, Roma parents know there are implicit costs (clothes, food, sometimes transportation) that they cannot afford. Children often keep a part of any money for their own expenses. Usually, these are items of necessity, which is an indication of the family's inability to provide for children's basic needs.

Still, economic research demonstrates that the relation between poverty and child labor is often not linear [Bhalotra, 2003 cf. OECD, 2003; Ghinararu, 2004]. Different levels of poverty may lead to different prevalences of child labor (poverty of the household, poverty of communities, regional poverty). Whereas children will tend to work in poor households, the possession of

land-holdings may actually increase the probability that children will work. This is the situation with the Rudari communities, where land ownership is frequent.

Even if, as stated earlier, Roma are generally poorer than the majority population in terms of income, a wider definition of poverty, understood as “capability deprivation” [Sen, 1999], is better able to link the economic situation of Roma with their social position. There are many other things, and not income poverty as such, which keep Roma families from having the same social standing as the majority population. The fact that, given the same level of family poverty, a Roma child will be more likely to work, whereas a non-Roma child will be more likely to go to school, says a lot about the larger concept of deprivation that Roma face. There are many things that rich Roma do not - and often cannot – accomplish for reasons other than poverty.

While bringing unquestionable benefits, the rise in income poverty alone cannot bring about ethnic equality. Roma self-perceptions as second-class citizens, also incorporated into society at large and its institutions (in the media, education, healthcare, on the labor market), prevents them from having (in Amartya Sen’s expression) the freedom to choose lives that “they have reasons to value”. A. Sen [1999] uses the example of the African-American minority from the US, i.e. who have comparable incomes with the majority population but who also have much lower life expectancies. They have much higher incomes than people from the Indian state of Kerala, for example, but lower life expectancies too, both men and women alike.

An increasing number of families from the majority population of Romania, also face up to the problem of unemployment and poverty - though solutions are often different. If, with the majority population, one or both parents may emigrate seeking work, the great majority of Roma families are more likely to remain at home. The same pattern was seen in relation to the situation of Roma living in Albania [De Soto et. al, 2005]. The main reason Roma from Albania do not emigrate (which I find valid, too, for majority of Roma from Romania) is that they lack both the initial money and social capital [De Soto et. al, 2005]. If they do, they tend to emigrate together with their



families (including children) and have very little trust in the institutions aiming to 'mediate their positions'<sup>21</sup>.

Roma economic deprivation can be read through the lens of social deprivation. Consequently, there is a need for both economic and social policies. An improved economic situation for Roma will be valuable in the sense that it can give families a sense of security for the future and an ability to plan for the long term. This could well lead to a shift in the dynamics linking children's education and work. Whereas money is important, what such policies may bring (an improved social position, a capacity to negotiate and to make choices) will be more important in terms of the child labor.

### *3.2 Factors related to education*

The relation between school and work is not uni-directional. It is not clear if "child labor discourages school attendance or if it only lowers the quality of school attainment" [Sedlacek et al., 2005: 2]. For one category of children, it is certain that the work they do prevents them from attending school. For another category, however, it is the school that pushes them out - and they then start working. However, maybe the largest category of children is made up of those who combine school *with* work. Worldwide, the largest category of working children do attend school. This is, according to White and Lieten [2001], one of the aspects usually forgotten in policy papers: studies of child labor tend to believe that children who work do not go to school, whereas studies on education ignore the fact that many children work. This issue is particularly relevant in policy design, as interventions aimed at "increasing enrollment are different from those aimed at raising the productivity of time spent in school" [Sedlacek et al., 2005: 2].

The next section will try to bring together some of the barriers Roma children face in education. Poverty, which is the main reason discussed by both parents and children, has been addressed in a previous sub-chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Dana Diminescu, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris.

### *3.2.1 The insufficiency of schools and difficult transportation*

The data relating to schools in general do not distinguish between predominantly Roma and other schools. In general, in Romania the number of schools and kindergartens is a problematic issue. In spite of the fact that new schools are being built each year, many children still have to study in deplorable conditions. Due to demographic changes in rural areas, many villages do not have the necessary number of children for a school to function. Under these circumstances, they are shut down, and children are transported to the nearest school. Despite progresses made, in many isolated villages, children's transportation continues to be a matter of concern.

In September 2006, out of 14.015 schools in the country, 4.868 were without running water; while 3.439 kindergartens were in the same situation<sup>22</sup>. 3.748 schools and 3.017 kindergartens do not have decent sanitary equipment. There is no data specifically on the situation of schools with high number of Roma children. However, when considering the decentralization trend in the Romanian educational system, which ascribes to municipalities and local communities the responsibility for funding part of education, and the general poverty of such communities, one can assume that the higher the number of Roma children in a school, the more precarious the material conditions. The few exceptions are represented by the small number of new schools being constructed in Roma communities with non-governmental resources (usually via PHARE projects and ones from international organizations).

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<sup>22</sup> Alma Maksutaj, Altin Hazizaj, *Child Labor and Street Children in Albania. Research into economic exploitation and forced child labor in Albania* Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania – CRCA, November 2005, Tirana. In India, the MV Foundation also came to the same conclusion.

### 3.2.2 *The quality of education*

The quality of teaching staff is less satisfactory in more isolated villages, where qualified teachers are reluctant to go due to limited transportation and non-motivating salaries. There are many Roma teachers who are qualified to teach the Romani language and, also, school mediators. Many training sessions and resources have been devoted to the education of Roma teaching staff, while the school dropout rate among Roma children is increasing.

Discriminatory practices from some teachers are a further barrier to education. Often, Roma parents have a close understanding of the constraints teachers face when trying to comply with different pressures put on them by parents from the majority population. They are aware of the limitations of working with increasingly defiant children and sometimes in overcrowded classes, yet do have positive memories of their own schooling. There are, still, situations when Roma parents tend to blame teachers for not being zealous enough and tend to have expectations that sometimes exceed the professional duties of a teacher:

*“Teachers should make explanations until the child understands. When I was a child, teachers didn’t let you go home if you didn’t understand something! They kept you on after hours and explained everything...! Now, they’re just waiting for the break.”*

[Mother, aged 32].

Even if there is a governmental recommendation concerning the elimination of school segregation, there are still many schools having a Roma majority. One of the problems that come with segregation is the low quality of education, the low motivation of children and teachers alike, and reduced educational aspirations. Moreover, simple attendance is not to be confused with a good school *performance* [White and Lieten, 2001]. Roma children may

find themselves almost illiterate at the end of four primary classes, which will increase the likelihood of further school dropout.

Contrary to general opinions, especially in international circles [Willson, 2002], the language barrier issue is not of the degree usually attributed to it. Whereas a small minority of traditional Roma may encounter such difficulties, the large majority do not speak Romani at home and it is not the language that prevent their school progress. The reason why Roma children are taught Romani at school is mainly a cultural one; for in a situation where many Roma prefer to hide their ethnic identity, language programs like this are meant to empower and build a positive sense of being Roma.

However, even when schools are of good quality, and nearby, this does not ensure a good education for Roma children. Lacking the time and physical space to prepare for lessons at home, working children are often tired at school, so are less able to concentrate. Low nutrition and housing, poor family support in relation to school are also barriers to a quality education.

### 3.2.3 Attitudes toward education

A large number of Roma parents have had 8 or 10 years of education, attained during communism. Even if many are functionally illiterates, at that time they were still included in the educational system, at different levels. Later on, many of them got qualifications at their workplace, and a decent salary was guaranteed. Parents do know their professional achievements were because of the system, and they know that such a protective system is not there for their own children. During the transition, many developed a strong sense of helplessness, that was transferred intergenerationally. In rural areas, numerous Roma parents think that their childhood was better when compared to that of their children:

*“It was much better when I was of her age - there were four salaries in the house... Now, people don’t have jobs, so are living only on social security benefits. In the winter there is nothing here you can do but wait about...” [Woman, 45 years old].*

Both parents and children say that education matters. They have a strong sense of what is socially desirable, and invariably use middle-class discourse when referring to the value of education. To a certain extent, this attitude is typical with many disadvantaged groups. They tend to see education as a vague and long-term project that cannot be divided into having short-term goals [Olthoff, 2006]. Roma parents and their children, too, are inclined to have this attitude. However, at a latter stage they may establish a contrary position - which is able to tell us more about the dilemmas being experienced by many children (Roma and non-Roma alike).

Less exposed to the principles adhering to the new labor market and secluded from a world where education matters, many disadvantaged peoples (Roma and non-Roma) stop seeing school as important for them. C. Ghinararu reasons that this gap is highly to blame for the existence of child labor in some isolated Romanian villages [Ghinararu, 2004].

On the other hand, when taking into account the small benefits to be gained via education (especially secondary education) in today's Romania, many Roma opinions do seem rational. They know that education is not always the answer to poverty and unemployment - and this may add to the reasons for parents not investing time, energy or money in schooling. They have a deep sense that society does not reward merit as it should, and that a confusion of values and economic polarization has made education problematic for a large proportion of Roma and majority-populations. In addition, success stories coming via education are extremely rare in Roma communities. Young, educated Roma are often unemployed, and struggle with the same difficulties. Not without reason, the skeptical leitmotif of the unemployed university graduate is often invoked to support the argument:

*What's the sake of going to University when you see that people who have graduated are still unemployed, working in construction or cleaning floors...!?" [Ana, 12 years old].*

School is not regarded as a profitable investment in the long run also due to the greater-than-before educational qualifications needed to enter a

restricted labor market. 'Credential inflation' is the term that is best able to describe this situation. This theory was developed by Randall Collins in the early '60s, to speak about the devaluation of school diplomas. Boudon also speaks about an "inflation spiral" [Boudon, cf. Elster, 1978]. For many Roma, the low returns from investment in secondary education undermine any initiative to continue education – and such an attitude tends to be characteristic of a large stratum of the general population, especially from rural areas.

Attitudes toward girls' education are ambivalent. If in the case of non-working and above-average urban Roma families there is an incentive to educate girls, so that they obtain reasonable and "light" work afterwards, poor parents are aware that such opportunities are very low. They see labor market discrimination against women (especially Roma) and think that working options for girls will be limited to being a portress or their entering one of many poorly-paying clothing plants. In general, parents' attitudes do not seem influenced by patriarchal and oppressive attitudes towards girls, in the sense that one might expect. They are, rather, internalizations of a discriminatory (and patriarchal) type of labor market.

Depending on their age, working girls who are still in school are more assertive, but generally have an aim of working in similar-level jobs, e.g. as hair stylists or shop assistants. Their career prospects are realistic; they know their means and have role models who have succeeded without great educational effort. On the whole, one could say there do not seem to be many professional prospects for the average Roma girl - and to a certain extent they have internalized a lack of motivation.

Many policies that have attempted to raise the level of school attendance of Roma have focused on needs to improve the curricula in order to incorporate children's different cultural experiences. Where it is, of course, beneficial to have more inclusive courses, there is still a basis for skepticism here about their value in terms of increased school attendance. According to the same theory of credential inflation, parents, in general, know that education is not an end in itself - and the reason they send their children to school is not an intellectual one but the fact that they may get a decent job in

the future; or, in other words, “the reasons for going to school are extraneous to whatever goes on in the classroom” [Collins, 1979: 192].

As a result, seeing the problem of child labor as a matter of negotiation between schools and children (and their families) is not able to provide a solution. By including the labor market in the equation and revisiting the function of schooling in relation to employment opportunities may be a more realistic approach. It may sound an overly large enterprise, but one must acknowledge that schools do not function in a vacuum - and unless energies are directed towards the labor market issue, schools will continue to make illusory promises to both Roma and majority-population children.

### *3.3 Factors related to values and norms*

The transfer of skills from parents to children is often considered a typical situation via which Roma children may enter the world of work. The image of traditional communities where children take up the occupation of their parents comes to the fore. This was the case with Roma families who were self-employed during communism and were successful in finding an economic niche afterwards. Many of them faced fewer problems when adjusting to the present, are proud of being “gypsies”, and do not identify with modern Roma groups. (This research did not include traditional Roma families, i.e. that preserve their customs and language).

The assumption is that owing to higher levels of poverty and exclusion, non-traditional Roma who used to be employed during communism and who now rely on social security are more likely to enter into child labor. Non-traditional Roma children are more likely to do unqualified jobs, as part of a family strategy, out of poverty - and not because there is an occupational tradition to be kept or a profitable family business to contribute to.

The most traditional group this research includes is the Rudari, who are generally considered a semi-traditional group. From this research’s fieldwork, child labor here appeared to be strongly linked to tradition and was deeply incorporated into cultural life only in their case. This group was also the most prosperous one of all; and they are not as geographically and culturally isolated as one might assume. For part of the year many of the adults are

seasonal workers abroad (in Spain, mainly). During the summer, for two months at least, whole families are street vendors in the country's cities. They dwell in a small town, but in a compact neighborhood, with social boundaries that put a limit on the links with Romanian and Roma populations, especially when it comes to marriage.

Whereas, historically, the Rudari are considered a branch of Roma, they identify themselves as being different - and sometimes as "in between" Roma and Romanians. Some members of the Rudari community have chosen to abandon some Rudari values (like early marriage and buying the bride), indeed are critical of them. Many others think that these practices are quite deplorable, though continue to adhere to them. The consequences of doing otherwise could mean assuming a dissident position in the Rudari community - and a marginal one in Romanian community.

Girls are especially more vulnerable when in such a situation. In Rudari communities, child labor goes along with early marriage. Often, girls are married from the age of 13. Living with the groom's family, a girl's status may resemble that of a young domestic servant, for they live in a strict (and sometimes oppressive) environment. They internalize traditional gender roles at an early age:

*"Once you get married, you don't go to school anymore! You are now married, so stay at home to do the housework! If your mother-in-law sees that you aren't working, she'll drive you out! [...]*  
*Some mothers-in-law are really awful... You have to be standing and on the go all day long. If she catches you sitting down for a breather, she'll go crazy! She has demands on you, even if you are small... She wants you to do more than she's doing. She wants you to take over her hardships... To get up at five in the morning, feed the birds, to cook in silence until she gets up at 10..."*  
 [Cristina, 13 and half years old, married for 10 months]



As in other traditional societies [Doftori, 2004], a strong focus on strict gender roles and values of seniority give certain persons authority over children. It is in this context that children's work for the common welfare becomes a social expectation. Girls' work power thus appears to be transferred from their original family to the groom's. Limited social interaction with parents and previous friends (unless they are married) means that a strong sense of isolation and sometimes depression may accompany the first years of marriage. Things do tend to change when the new family has its own children and gains more autonomy, even if it remains in a multi-generational household.

The Rudari think that the presence of an extended family is supportive and is something other ethnic groups do not have. They know that it is hard for a young couple to live on their own, especially when they have got a poor education and live in a rural area. However, whereas the family does support a young couple as regards building a home and cultivating land, it also pushes them into marriage in ways that are not always explicit: "*The kids loved each other. What shall we do?*". Back home, when an older girl has got married, her younger sister or brother takes over a part of the housework – which may often include taking care of other younger children and also working on the land. The cycle of child labor thus reproduces itself.

In many non-traditional Roma communities (and in traditional Romanian communities, too), child labor (unless it takes very severe forms) is culturally acceptable. Internationally, it is recognized that child labor would not be so common if it didn't benefit from social and cultural approval<sup>23</sup>. There is a general assumption that work is good. In this culture, children are expected to contribute to the family's earnings. Many Roma and majority-population families share the belief that early work shapes character and makes children better prepared for life. What is problematic, though, is that the border

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<sup>23</sup> Alma Maksutaj, Altin Hazizaj, *Child Labor and Street Children in Albania. Research into economic exploitation and forced child labor in Albania* Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania – CRCA, November 2005, Tirana. In India, the MV Foundation also came to the same conclusion.

between assuming small responsibilities (which is helpful to development) and child labor (which is detrimental) is often flexible.

Apart from (probably) highly traditional Roma families and semi-traditional (e.g. the Rudari), child labor will tend to be an issue arising from a deprived economic and social context than by deeply-rooted cultural norms. An informal labor market based on semi-skilled manual work reinforces social expectations regarding children. In these circumstances, late childhood is socially constructed as the age of maturity. At the age of 14 children receive identity cards; and this is also the age when one finishes elementary school. As for rural children, a continuation of education would mean high transportation and housing costs. Under these circumstances, the age of 14 is the doorway to adulthood - and entry into the world of labor.

The mobility of some Roma communities (with external or internal migrations for seasonal work) additionally influences the early entry into the world of work. For different reasons (nobody is left at home to provide for other children, and their help is needed) children live with their parents. This is also the case with a few Romanian pastoral communities. Here, families' dependency on shepherding was recognized, and a compromise was made - the school calendar was changed in order to fit in with children's and their families' activities. Yet this did not happen in schools having mostly Roma children, and in places where children leave school earlier. Teachers may make informal arrangements for Roma children to have their final papers done, though they may also miss school.

The practice of leaving school approximately two weeks earlier than others for different labor tasks is often found. Even if parents may not see all this as an important loss, the educational system is competitive and such practices do still put Roma children in a position of disadvantage when compared with the rest.

Parents definitely attach a low value to the education of their children and have low educational expectations from them. The problem is not that parents think education is not necessary, but how much education they think is

necessary<sup>24</sup>. Their emotional support for children attending school is often limited and many children lack a motivating home environment that may encourage them to continue education. Besides this, parents often tend to believe that unless children really like school from the very beginning, perhaps school is 'not for them'. Both Roma and poor Romanian parents have a tendency to withdraw their support from children who are less than successful at school [Stativa 2004].

*"He didn't like school. What could I have done? At the beginning I beat him, but after a while I realized that there's no point... that maybe I cause him something and it will be my problem all over again. [...] Now he's 15. He can read individual letters, yet it takes him hours to read a page. But when counting money, well, he's an expert!"*

Father, aged 33, Rudar

Children are not passive when it comes to working, and it is not always parents who oblige them to work. Children's entry into labor is habitually mediated by their understanding of poverty. From an early age, many Roma children and poorer Romanian children have experienced deprivation, and have sought out solutions to be able to resist it, perhaps transform it. Even when one or both parents are uncaring, children do feel a solidarity with their families - if not with the parents, then with siblings, or with one supportive parent. However, resilience is not without costs. Long term consequences of children's coping strategies, are yet to be explored.

Parents may want their best for their children, but they lack choices, or may lack a long-term perspective. In these circumstances, many disadvantaged parents (Roma and majority-population alike) employ parenting strategies that encourage children to work. For example, parents

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<sup>24</sup> Findings from focus groups conducted by Educatia 2000+ project.

may often praise an adult task done by a child more than they would a good school performance.

This may happen not because the parents have an unscrupulous wish for their child to focus on work more, but because the parents themselves, due to their own poor education, do not feel that they are able to control a child's school performances. Consequently parents may think that sending a child to school is all they can do - and the school should take care of the rest. This was also the experience of PETI (a program for the elimination of child labor in Portugal<sup>25</sup>).

However, parents are not all altruistic, and there *are* situations where the family exploits its children (or are mediators in their exploitation). They might sell or rent them out for work, criminal activities or for begging. Often, they are deceived into doing so, or have constraints put upon them (in communities that operate with a strong hierarchical network). Yet with the same levels of deprivation, different families may make different choices.

There is not enough evidence to prove that a specific element of the family or community dynamic unquestionably 'causes' situations of child trafficking or the use of children for begging. One can only look at potential risk factors relating to a child's entry into the worst forms of child labor (such as the more recent system of informal money-lending that has become established in some Roma communities, or criminal networks that recruit Roma children for delinquent activities and where the police have limited powers to intervene).

Ultimately, child labor (for both Roma and the majority population) would not be so widespread if there was no demand for it and a major degree of cultural 'acceptability' i.e. coming from those who benefit from it. Demand may take many forms. The subsistence type of agriculture based on family farms [Ghinararu, 2004] and the use of undeveloped technologies creates an informal market for child labor. There is now an ageing population in the countryside, which increases the need for seasonal workforces. Roma often do such work, and, as stated earlier, children will also.

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<sup>25</sup> Information kindly provided by Joaquina Cadete, Director PETI.

The employing of Roma children, even if in isolated cases, appears to have a high degree of social acceptability for children, their families, employers, and also for the authorities (who may well turn a blind eye to the phenomenon)<sup>26</sup>. Employers may see a child's own characteristics as being inherently profitable (compliance, discipline, an ability to undertake long hours of repetitive work, accepting poor wages or payment in kind, working unconventional hours). For children experiencing the worst forms of child labor some other criteria might be taken into consideration (e.g. higher earnings, lower penalties and a reduced chance of being caught if involved in criminal activity). Under these circumstances, one could speak about an instrumentalisation of childhood and adult expedient behavior.

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<sup>26</sup> In M. county, for instance, a formal complaint at the Work Inspectorate about a 12-year-old boy who dropped out school and was employed at a recycling centre was followed by an inspection at the workplace, which confirmed the presence of the child (who was actually there). However, as the child declined to make a written declaration on his employment status (as required by the Inspection) and said he was here just to bring in some recyclable metal, the Inspection made no further enquiries, so nothing was done.

## 4 Why to Combat Roma Child Labor?

There are many possible rationales for combating child labor, although the economic rationale and children's rights are the most discussed ones. Even if there is a certain ethical tension between the two, this policy paper will take a look at both of them, while also taking on board other, more specific concerns.

### *Roma child labor should be combated because it is a violation of children's rights*

Roma is the largest ethnic minority group in the enlarged European Union, and one of the most vulnerable to poverty and exclusion. Children, particularly, are a weaker position group due to the disadvantages coming via ethnicity, age and gender (for girls in more traditional communities). The problem of child labor brings the issue of children's rights and their agency in the middle of social concern.

Children should not merely be respected because they are "the future" but because they are human beings - and, in the same way, child labor needs to be combated not because of its long-term economic value but because it is a human rights violation and interferes with other rights (the right to education, to rest and leisure). So child labor can be seen, simultaneously, as a consequence of and a basis for other human rights violations. In the end, the debate may then cover the broader issue of poverty as a human rights violation. Consequently, it is difficult to see what the independent value of 'child labor' is, within the bigger structure of children's rights.

The position of children who combine work with school attendance may appear as problematic in the discussion about children's rights, as long as there are children who work in order to secure the means to go to school. Still, despite a strong emphasis on enrollment<sup>27</sup>, it is important not to confound the right to education with enrollment or attendance; for if labor does not always

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<sup>27</sup> See Decade Action Plan (Romania), 2007.

prevent a child from attending school, it is very likely to stop them reaching their educational potential and making the best use of the education they *do* receive.

Internationally, child labor is often discussed with reference to cultural relativism [see White, 1999]. As in the case of many other “universal” rights, it is argued that child labor may be understood differently in different cultures, which fact makes the enforcement of global standards problematic. Indeed, many child rights violation may take place in the name of protection of cultural identity [White, 1999]. So it is important *who* does the defining of a specific social problem if the community itself does *not* recognize it as such (e.g. early marriage and child labor in Rudari communities). There is also the danger of reinforcing a “cultural” practice should protests against it emanate from the majority population, and there are deep tensions between the two.

One might indeed wonder whether child labor is not, in fact, a matter of Roma’s own culture, where notions like “childhood” and “child labor” may be socially constructed in an entirely different way. Moreover, one could then question whether the whole idea of children’s rights in the sense acknowledged by the majority is actually less relevant to Roma. Such an argument may have some intellectually appeal, resonating as it does with a large body of literature that gives culture a form of dialogue with the ‘universality’ of human rights [White, 1999; Tharoor, 2000].

However, if one sees culture as tradition (which is often the case in much Roma literature) I would argue that such a debate by no means adequately represents the majority of Roma. For ; non-traditional Roma (living in the cities and in rural areas alike), child labor is *not* a part of their ethnicity. Employing such an argument may be misleading and even dangerous, by giving legitimacy to agencies doing nothing to address the situation of Roma working children.

It is true that poverty and residential segregation may bring to light community practices like child labor and also suggest that this is what being Roma *is*. Yet this was not the case years ago, when Roma had jobs, decent housing and lived in mixed neighborhoods. Poverty and segregation mediates and strengthens aspects of life that might be understood as “cultural”. By no means, though, are they ways in which non-traditional Roma want their

children to be raised. I would argue that the degree to which Roma parents think work is important for their children does not exceed the degree that the majority population does. Seeing it as a cultural value does a great injustice to Roma.

In the cultural debate on child labor it is important to remember, again, that Roma are not a homogenous group. This research was undertaken mainly with non-traditional Roma. The only semi-traditional group was the Rudari. Child labor and early marriage are to a larger extent, cultural practices for the latter and probably for other traditional groupings (the Kalderari, Cortorari, Gabori). The roots of such practices may go back to the centuries of slavery and the persecution of Roma [Nicolae, 2004]. As Valeriu Nicolae suggests, tackling what is cultural practice for traditional Roma now needs to go further than just seeing it in the language of human rights. Cultures can and do change – and even among the majority Roma there is no clear endorsement of such practices.

***Roma child labor should be combated because Romania has both national and international obligations***

Romania has ratified the International Convention for the Protection of Children's Rights, relevant ILO Conventions and it has taken on board Millennium Development Goals. In January 2007, Romania joined the European Union, promising to work in the direction of prohibiting ethnicity-based discrimination and improving standards of child protection.

In 2005, the Romanian government gave its signature to the Declaration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and committed itself to making efforts to “eliminate discrimination and closing the unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society”. This means fighting against Roma poverty, exclusion, and discrimination in the areas of health, education, employment and housing. These are all deeply related to child labor. The government is the body that



can act to improve the situation of all of Romania's children, including the 102,000 Roma<sup>28</sup> below the age of 14.

### *Combating child labor is economically cost-effective*

Especially in transitory economies, when needs outnumber available resources, governmental policies tend to be economically driven. When responding to an economics-based question one could argue that combating child labor would be cost-effective. A large body of literature on the knowledge economy demonstrates the high rate of returns from investment in basic education, especially within developing countries.

Even if the value of educational expansion on national economic development is a matter of debate [Hannum and Buchmann, 2003], it can be demonstrated that it does influence persons' health. An expansion of education cannot help erode inequalities coming via ethnicity in the short term, as majority groups are also developing. Yet, it can promise new economic opportunities and improved living standards for both [Hannum and Buchmann, 2003].

In spite of the fact that, for various reasons (e.g. poor employment opportunities, early marriage), parents may believe that 'returns' from educating girls will be low [Ota 2001 cf. Matz, 2002], evidence does show that the primary education of girls gives a higher return rate than any other form of developmental strategy [Psacharopoulos, 1985 and 1999, cf. Myers, 2001].

At the start, child labor may improve the economic situation of a family. However, in the long term it may prove to be detrimental, as the family remains poor and unable to escape from the poverty trap. In the end, working children are more exposed to poverty, social exclusion and unemployment. They will tend to be less able to perform physical work in their adulthood and, will be more likely to get poorly paid jobs later in life. The market options get more and more restricted for a child laborer. In addition, later on, working children tend to encourage their own children to enter labor, themselves.

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<sup>28</sup> This is the number officially documented.

On the whole, the likelihood of there being a dependency on social security benefits later on in life is higher for presently existing child laborers and their families. A reliance on state assistance will continue to prevent the economic development of both Roma communities and the state - that is, if relevant policy decisions are not made. Solutions to the problem must take on board the long-term benefits of policy intervention so as to combat child labor through education.

*Roma child labor should be combated because it limits freedom of choice and it reproduces patterns of an underclass*

According to Amartya Sen's arguments [1999], economic rationales can only be a means for development that is understood as freedom. Having people with autonomy and the capacity to make choices is the most sustainable benefit in any poverty alleviation policy. What child labor does, is limit the freedom to make beneficial choices with regard to education and, later, employment. Also, it is then reproduced inter-generationally and further restricts the opportunities the children of such child laborers will have.

From the perspective of social relations, it is noteworthy that many working Roma children have some experience of working – with their families or alone - for wealthier Romanian or Hungarian families. So they may have internalized an ethnicity-based, subordinate position at an early age. In these circumstances, Roma child labor needs to be combated in addition because it helps shape distorted inter-ethnic relationships for future generations.

Roma child labor is still accepted to a major extent by the general population. Deeper prejudices seeing Roma ethnicity as marginal and as inhabiting a different cultural world serve to keep Roma children at the periphery of social concern. If the purpose is to reduce ethnicity-based inequalities, Roma children need to gain a sense of security and respect – instead of, as is the case, learning how to cope with humiliation and a sense of second-class citizenship.

## 5 Roma Child Labor in its Current Policy Environment – Legal Framework, Institutions and Programs

### *The theoretical framework of Romanian policies to combat child labor*

There are many theoretical positions existing in the debate on child labor. According to Myers [2001] and Ennew [2003], there are essentially four approaches when we look at child labor. The first is a labor market discourse, which focuses on legal measures to limit children's participation in the labor market. The second is a human capital discourse that aims to equip children with the educational skills that will help improve labor opportunities later on. The third approach (inspired by a social responsibility discourse) sees child labor as a consequence of "social exclusion", something preventing children from benefiting from society's protection; and the fourth approach comes from the CRC, and focuses on children's *own* views regarding work.

Until now in Romania, the problem of child labor has been associated with the first two approaches, which emphasize the benefits to society of combating child labor; the latter two approaches are less frequently heard or adopted<sup>2930</sup>. Proposed solutions are mainly influenced by ILO policies and by the notion that a child's place is in school. The underling assumption is that school is better able to increase children's future potential. However, as stated earlier, in the case of Roma children (though not only them) there are various concerns expressed regarding the actual capacity of the education system to give better prospects to persons.

At the policy level, there is a general agreement that school dropout and child labor are matters of poverty only - and that by solving parents' problems

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<sup>29</sup> A. Invernizzi [2005] identified the same tendency in Portugal.

(poverty and unemployment), children's problems, also, will come to an end. However, paraphrasing Amartya Sen [1999], a country should not wait until it is rich in order to solve the problem of child labor. Economic growth may take many forms, and be more or less sustainable. By itself, though, it need not guarantee a reduction in child labor [Sedlacek et al., 2005, OECD, 2003], for economic growth need not be equally distributed. Consequently, the right policies matter at least as much as economic progress [ILO, 2006].

### *Romania's actions against child labor in an international context*

Romania ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in 1990, ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (1999) in 2000 and the ILO Minimum Age Convention (1973) in 1975. However, there is no minimum age that one might make reference to when it comes to *unpaid* employment, which usually takes place in rural areas and within the family. Even if Convention No. 138 (which Romania has ratified) does refer to *all* forms of employment or work (with or without payment or a contract of employment), the Romanian Labor Code excludes the category of unpaid work<sup>31</sup>.

The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) has been active in Romania since March 2000. Child laborers were recognized for the first time in Romanian legislation as a category to be dealt with in 2001<sup>32</sup>. The majority of governmental programs and documents on child labor came via Romania's new legal obligations after having signed international conventions. As the elimination of child labor is an EU priority with regard to child protection, new institutions - and new links among existing ones - were recently established in order to develop national programs for the elimination of child labor.

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<sup>31</sup> According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions [2005], in 2004, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations criticised the exclusion of such work from the Romanian Labor Code.

<sup>32</sup> Documents which first recognized child laborers as a category of beneficiaries were The National Strategy on Child Protection (2001-2004) and the Operational Plan for Implementation, approved by the Government Decision 539/2001.

Yet, for the moment, one cannot speak about the existence of a coherent national dialogue relating to child labor. Most concerned reports have a limited distribution inside the country. Many of them appear in English, which has the advantage of launching the issue of child labor internationally, though there is the drawback of there being limited in-country circulation.

If we take a look at international evaluations of national programs being carried out, we do see controversy. On the one hand, according to the ILO-IPEC Coordinator for Europe and the Middle East<sup>33</sup>, Romania's progress "was the basis for the country's nomination as the focal point of all ILO-IPEC programs carried out in Eastern Europe during 2004-2007".

On the other hand, in November 2005 the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions<sup>34</sup> thought that "child labor legislation enforcement tends to be lax except for in extreme cases". According to the U.S. Department of State, "the roles and responsibilities of the agencies that enforce child labor laws remain ill-defined, and such laws are often only enforced when a particularly grave case becomes public." Moreover, despite the existence of high rates of child labor, in 2004 there were no reports of *anyone* being charged or convicted under any of the child labor laws (according to the Romanian Labor Inspectorate and International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 2005).

### *Whose responsibility?*

Since 2004, and with ILO IPEC support, Romania has had a National Plan of Action for Combating Child Labor. It focuses on the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency, and less on the majority of working children who risk entering the category. Even if Roma children are the group with the highest risk of entering child labor - in its worst forms, too - the National Plan

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<sup>33</sup> Romania. Ministry of Labor, Social Solidarity and the Family. The Press Office, February 18, 2004. Press Release. "Enforcing of the International Program to Combat Child Labor in Romania, a personal priority for the Minister of Labor, Mrs. E. Dumitru", at [www.mmssf.ro/e\\_comunicate/e24feb04copii.htm](http://www.mmssf.ro/e_comunicate/e24feb04copii.htm).

<sup>34</sup> International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), Internationally-Recognised Core Labor Standards in Romania, Report for the WTO General Council Review on the Trade Policies of Romania (Geneva, 28 and 30 November 2005).

for Action to Combat Child Labor [2004] makes no specific reference to Roma children.

It is obvious that improving the situation of Roma children requires a strong political will at the national level. Even if only informally stated, political parties know that aiming to address many of the problems Roma face, could be politically hazardous. This tendency to shy away from full political engagement, even within an internationally recognized framework like the Decade of Roma Inclusion, has been discussed by Valeriu Nicolae [2005].

Since 1989, mostly short-term populist policies have been implemented. They have created dependency rather than stimulate the development and social cohesion of Roma communities. Now, there are several needs-based state subsidies, from which Roma benefit (indirectly). There is a monthly state benefit for persons without any other source of income (not necessarily Roma); and there is a universal, monthly child-care allowance. Both of these benefits do not have as a condition the school enrolment of children. Indirectly, also, Roma benefit from the existence of a program to give all children in primary schools, a free breakfast at school. Socially-disadvantaged children may receive writing materials, free computers or even scholarships- yet the process of application typically requires many documents (some of them costly), and both the application and the selection processes are time-consuming and frustrating.

Generally, there is a tendency to put responsibility for non-school-going children onto NGOs and local communities - and not onto local educational authorities or a Local Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights. As other situations appear to be more 'pressing', references made to school dropout that could be referred to a Local Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights, for example, are considered less than relevant.

Local educational authorities tend to play down their role with regard to children not attending school<sup>35</sup> and to speak vaguely about the community's

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<sup>35</sup> Informal statement of a school inspector for counseling from M. county, at a meeting preceding the opening of a day centre for working children.

role in preventing school dropout. Yet the idea of community support is only referred to vaguely, i.e. without being assessed critically.

What is the meaning of “community” when issues like Roma child labor are being looked at? Does the sense of “community” mobilize non-Roma towards feeling common responsibility? And, consequently, what are the instruments and resources available locally to deal with such a problem if the greater the percentage of Roma in an area, the more limited the resources available? And what if child labor is not recognized as a violation of a shared norm in a particular “community”? In the movement for a decentralization of decision-making, state may have a basis for overlooking such an inference, especially when it comes to culturally-sensitive issues like domestic child labor in Roma communities, for example.

There are NGOs that have programs aimed at rehabilitating children who have dropped out of school and who have entered the world of labor. Though; there are few good practices in this field - for some such programs end up being day centers only, with a limited amount of education on offer there and without there being any clear goals or indicators of success. Insofar as these programs aim to be educational, the situation is problematic.

There is a general agreement that such initiatives are helpful and that they do respond to a social need - and, ultimately, they are “better than nothing”. Yet one does not know whether such initiatives are doing more harm than good. Children aged between 7 and 15 years typically go to the same center, without there being any realistic prospect of integrating them into a mainstream school later on or to improve their employment opportunities. In general, it is not known, either, what children and parents’ expectations are from such programs and what their success indicators might be.

### *Working children and street children*

On the whole, the working children do not get the same public recognition as the street children do. Although the issue of “street children” is often linked to working, the connection is rarely made explicit. While fewer than 1% of the total population of working children are “street children” (though the definition itself is contentious) one might say that there is a disproportionate amount of

interest in the later group. This is not to say that street children do not have severe problems that need to be addressed without delay. What I *do* consider to be problematic is that the “issue of street children” might risk taking over the whole problem of child poverty and social exclusion<sup>36</sup>.

The fact that the great majority of street children are Roma<sup>37</sup> and that many Roma children work, might generate the idea that street children and child labor are ethnic issues. Consequently, there is a great risk of persons misunderstanding major social problems like child labor and street children as being “ethnic” ones.

Under pressure to meet EU demands to improve child protection, there is only a limited concern shown for the less visible issues of child labor, child poverty, school dropouts and social exclusion. Despite their social invisibility, many children live and work in remote villages or in the privacy of their own homes or communities. Even official documents<sup>38</sup> gradually move the focus: from child labor to its worst forms. The main risk, then, is of overlooking a large category of less visible child laborers and economically-active children. Nonetheless, the; “idle children” who face the risk of entering child labor are escaping both programs designed for working children, and for children in school..

A recent campaign initiated by Save the Children to stop the begging phenomenon aims to convince people who offer money that it is not the children, but adults who make a gain. The main value of the campaign is that it is making people aware that Roma poverty is more complex than it seems: “by offering money, one indirectly sends children out begging, so that parents are not motivated to look for other survival solutions; and this keeps children in the same state of social degradation (...)” [Save the Children Romania, 2006].

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<sup>36</sup> Internationally, seems to be the same unbalanced focus on street children (see Boyden et al., 1998; Bhalotra and Hedy, 2003; Panter-Brick, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> IPEC, Roma Working Children and their Families, Socio-Cultural Characteristics and Living Conditions, (Bucharest: Ro Media Publishing House, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> See for example, the National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Child Labor 2006-2010.



Nonetheless, other policies are needed, too, in order to tackle the phenomenon's causes: why do children beg or become mere instruments of their parents or a criminal network? And what would happen to children who did not beg any more (if this should happen)? Will they go to school, as one might hope? Keeping beggar children 'invisible' can only touch the top of the iceberg; so a comfortable feeling is maintained for the majority - while poverty is pushed into the secluded peripheries.

## 6 Policy Recommendations

### *Levels of intervention*<sup>39</sup>

There are, in the main, three levels of intervention when referring to child labor (which is a classical division, and is operated with reference to many social problems). The primary level of intervention refers to large-scale interventions (like national educational provision, health-care, legislation). The secondary level aims to prevent children at risk from entering child labor; and it is not the country but vulnerable communities and schools that may be the main beneficiaries of preventive intervention. Tertiary interventions have as their goal the rehabilitation of child laborers so as to prevent future entry into the world of labor.

The following section will present policy recommendations addressing the problem of Roma child labor at these three levels. Each will have within it the proposed form of intervention, the body/agency having the most effective position to take on responsibility, and the main strengths, limitations and barriers involved when undertaking such interventions. Ultimately, the focus will be on the main windows of opportunity that might inspire and sustain action to combat Roma child labor.

### *6.1. Primary level interventions*

#### *International pressure*

There is a need to make a guarantee of the quality of programs for the rehabilitation of child laborers and to increase their political visibility. EU

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<sup>39</sup> "Intervention" is used as a generic term for any deliberate action (policy, service, activity) undertaken by an agent (government, local authority, school, social worker) meant to assist Roma in changing the status quo.

institutions have great credibility and the capacity to mobilize change. There is a need to enhance the monitoring of existing EU-funded programs addressing working children in terms of their final outcomes. At present, there is a critical lack of longitudinal evaluations. Even in the context of street children there are no obvious responses regarding what has worked (or has not worked) in Romania. There is also a need for European agencies to give increased attention to the street children issue in order to incorporate also the less visible problem of working children. EU institutions are in a position to generate such change - and the current amount of concern for child protection is a window of opportunity.

*Data collection from working children, including that based on ethnicity*

Existing statistics on child labor are problematic. They do not use the distinctions operating internationally, i.e. between economic activity, child labor and the worst forms of child labor. The effect is that situations of children engaged in hazardous work do not get the degree of attention they deserve. What is more, official data does not use ethnicity as a variable. In the absence of reliable statistics, child labor among Roma may only be deduced from poverty and schooling indicators. Building up policy recommendations for a population that is almost undocumented would be dangerous. Moreover, it may risk being perceived as culturally biased because of the stigma attached to the topic.

There are many reasons why, in Romania, the statistics on child labor do not include data on ethnicity. One could argue that the concept of ethnicity is fluid and contextual and cannot be easily “captured” into figures. There are, indeed, many methodological difficulties involved (how to classify children from mixed families, what is the legitimacy of hetero identification and so on). Child labor, on the other hand, is far from being an “innocent” topic; it is hard to define and is notoriously misreported.

Yet despite the reluctance seen in collecting data on ethnicity, there is also an important rationale for undertaking it. Collecting data on the ethnicity of working children can help bring knowledge of their *specific* needs. Culturally sensitive policies, ones able to better address Roma working children, could

then follow. Whereas European Anti-Discrimination Law regulations forbid the use of personal data, “once personal data are made anonymous in order to be used in statistics, the information contained in such statistics should not be considered personal data” [De Schutter, 2006: 26]. Moreover, such statistics may bring about a shift in the conventional way of data collection that has families and adults as units of analysis [Qvortrup, 2001; Saporiti, 2001]. Therefore, it is important to collect data *from* children and not *about* children, as adults tend to underreport the prevalence of child labor.

To conclude here, the main reason why Roma working children should be acknowledged in statistics is to legitimize the need for a particular treatment. If their situation is recognized, the National Plan for Action should incorporate the situation of Roma children as a particularly vulnerable group. Working Roma children may have distinct needs that need to be addressed; for the practice of Roma children working more for a Romanian household rather than for their own may otherwise remain undetected. As the National Institute of Statistics now functions as an independent institution, the National Authority for the Protection of Children’s Rights will be able to commission such large-scale research.

### *Are cash transfers sustainable solutions?*

By far, the most tarnished policies for combating of child labor come in the form of conditional cash transfers. The following section will briefly indicate what they are - and question to what extent they may be effective in Romania, what might be learned from previous experiences elsewhere, what actually works and what is most promising, what does not work, and what we do not yet know.

The *Bolsa Escola* scheme is a governmental program in Brazil, which was established in 2001. It provides cash transfers to poor households on the condition that children in the household attend school. Research shows that Bolsa Escola and similar social benefits do increase school attendance, though there is not enough evidence pointing to a decrease in child labor [Souza, 2005]. For children may simply combine a limited school attendance with working afterwards.

Programs like Bolsa Escola are based on principles of neoclassical economy. Consequently, many cultural and social aspects of child labor are not being taken into consideration here. The assumption that people are rational and self-interested is unable to count for gender prejudices, for the marginal position of children in a society or for the internal dynamics operating in a family with working children. And working children do not always receive the resources allocated them via the program [Cigno et al, 2002].

Conditional cash transfers are not a cheap investment, and a large bureaucratic apparatus will need to be involved in poverty assessment. In Brazil, this accounts for 1% of GDP. In Mexico, the *Progres*a program had reached around 2.6 million poor families by 2001, at a cost of US\$1 per child per day, equivalent to 0.2% of Mexico's GDP [Hesketh, 2006]. Yet there is always the risk that the people in most need of help will not be reached. Poor people may not have stable housing, change addresses or may not have identification; while not all families are so poor that they need their children's work in order to survive, i.e. it is much more than a need for extra income that causes children to work.

Child allowances in Romania used to be conditional upon school attendance, until recently. Many children may have gone to school merely to receive the allowance. Even if there is no evaluation, it is more than likely that they combined a (limited) school attendance with work, as was the case in Brazil.

Whereas conditional cash transfers for families so that they send their children to school do matter, in order to have longer-lasting results it is more important to change the ethos regarding education in Roma communities - and changing children's perspectives is a central aspect. Giving incentives to families to send children to school may bring about attendance but, as one knows from previous experience, school attendance does not mean that children are not working - and it does not mean that children are giving a better school performance. After a certain point, children will definitely earn more by working than what comes in a cash transfer - and evaluations show that no consistently long-term benefits in terms of combating child labor will follow on from a cash transfer policy alone [Gunnarsson, 2005].

*PETI* (Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil) seems to be the only cash transfer program that has succeeded in reaching out to child laborers. It is a program in Brazil, having as its main objective the reduction of child labor and increased school enrolment/attendance rates. Unlike Bolsa Escola, PETI has been successful because it took into consideration the school and working arrangements that children have - and extended the amount of time that children will spend at school. The after-school program decreased the available time for child labor and increased the value of a child's time in school. To ensure an adjusted vocational path, PETI includes training in a profession. The aim is to link children to their communities more successfully and raise the trust of prospective employers. In extreme cases - where a household relies on children's incomes - there are limited cash transfers, too, based on multiple evaluations. Still, the rationale is to persuade families of the long-term advantages of schooling rather than have them see short-term money benefits.

There are many problems that can be associated with a cash transfer program in Romania. There is, first of all, a concern whether such program should address Roma as a particularly vulnerable group - or should it be based on people's needs in general? Is it suitable to have a universal or needs-based criteria of allocation?

According to OSI and World Bank qualitative research [2005], there seems to be great concern among non-Roma that given the high level of poverty among the majority population, having ethnicity-based policies may add to an already existing tension: "The qualitative research suggests that it will be very difficult to build support for programs that only affect Roma. If efforts can be tied to programs that affect the greater society at large, there will be a bigger chance of success. In any case, governments will need to have the responsibility and move forward aggressively with any programs, as building up support in a cynical environment will be extremely challenging" [OSI, 2005: 4].

As there is a risk that "programs that appear to benefit only Roma children could be resented" [OSI, 2005: 16] government needs to balance the gains and losses of having ethnicity-based cash transfers. In current circumstances, a possible solution able to benefit Roma – yet that will not upset already

fragile inter-ethnic relations - is to have needs-based policies. This was the case until now, with many social subsidies benefiting Roma indirectly. I shall argue here that the majority-population attitude toward Roma does matter, and it is a solid base upon which to build. For the first time, the OSI Barometer [2007] indicates that the majority now accepts the Roma in Romania more.

According to Amartya Sen [1999], means-testing and “targeting” are, generally, problematic ways of distributing public provisions - and there will always be a few distortions. Firstly, there is the risk of denying the eligibility of precisely those who need it most, and according it to persons who might not be eligible. In Romania, it could well serve to maintain an informal labor market, which, in the absence of legal forms of employment, entitles people to social benefits.

Secondly, there is a lot of stigmatization and a sense of powerless associated with state benefits. According to Sen [1999], they are associated with high administrative costs and corruption. Also, recipients are often weak politically and may lack the power to demand quality from a program addressing them. The author’s conclusion here is that targeting is not detrimental, however - though it is important to see it as “an attempt, and not a result”, with many social and political problems being attached.

At present, in Romania major resources are being put into needs assessments and social benefits. A large administrative apparatus is now in place; social workers have a hard-to-manage bureaucratic workload - and not much time left for effectively working with the communities. However, instead of admitting or denying eligibility, why not focus on providing more sustainable solutions, ones able to give Roma a freedom of choice and more autonomy? Local employment opportunities for parents and improved schools are such solutions.

### *Improved education*

According to Amartya Sen [1999], as long as economic growth is not mediated through public services, its positive influence does not always reach the poor. For example, countries with a high increase in GNP (China)

continue to have a high incidence of child labor due to the inequitable distribution of resources. And there is evidence that even if economic growth does reach the poor, child labor may continue to exist because it can give more working opportunities to children.

This seems the explanation for the incidence of child labor in the wealthier areas of Romania and in more developed countries) [Ghinararu, 2004; Boyden, et.al., 1998]. This could lead to the solution that investing in a new concept of education in disadvantaged communities may have the double outcome of keeping children out of work and changing views on education.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Roma children are far more likely to attend schools that provide free transportation and a warm meal. Replicating such practices will definitely improve attendance. Following the practice of PETI, there is a need to adjust the existing infrastructure in order to extend the curriculum with afternoon activities. As housing is an important barrier to the quality of learning, schools should ensure adequate spaces for children to do their homework. This implies rethinking the need for staff and their qualifications, equipment and investment.

The Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Work, Social Solidarity and the Family are in a position to undertake this reform. Local Educational Authorities and Roma leaders should cooperate to get its implementation. The responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Work, Social Solidarity and the Family and local municipalities might include:

- To facilitate bureaucratic arrangements and provide the equipment needed for schools so they can provide a warm meal and transportation for disadvantaged children (apart from the necessary apparatus, one important reason for schools not providing warm meals or transportation is a lack of authorization and the complicated procedures to obtain it).
- To apply social needs criteria for funding schools, rather than performance-driven investments.
- To better equip schools so that children can develop new competencies (e.g. computer skills, which are valued in the current jobs market, are able to raise the interest of Roma children).
- To increase the number of Roma school mediators and make clear their roles and status in the community.
- To move from non-consistent local initiatives, which end up offering free meals and poor educational services, to a sustainable governmental



policy for the rehabilitation of working children, with transparent and measurable indicators.

- To adopt legislation against school segregation (where, for the moment, there is only a recommendation), and ensure that it is adequately enforced.
- To employ more qualified social assistants to identify exploitative situations inside families.
- To create motivating salaries and an improved social status for teachers working in disadvantaged schools (poor neighborhoods, remote rural areas).
- To continue the “Second Chance” class program, and improve its monitoring.

The economic returns of education are visible in the long term - they are neither spectacular nor immediate. This is one of the reasons why the investment in education made by all post-communist Romanian governments has always been scarce. In spite of a recent increase in the education budget (in 2007, 5.2% of GNP), public education in Romania continues to be severely under-funded. Romania has a total population of above 21 million, which puts it in 19<sup>th</sup> place in the EU25 according to population size. It has approximately 6 million persons of between 5-24 years. However, GNP is 1/3 of the average EU25 GNP. Under these circumstances, 5.2% being allocated to education cannot ensure quality standards - even if it is aiming itself at the European target of an at least 6% investment in education.

More education increases employment opportunities and, thus, future contributions to the state budget. Recognizing this, higher investments in education can lead to future economic development. One must of course acknowledge that not all levels of education matter in the same way when it comes to economic development; so this aspect will become visible in the long term only [Petrakis and Stamatakis, 2002 cf. Hannum and Buchmann, 2003]. In the case of Romania, tertiary education may be more important than primary or secondary education - yet one cannot have the first without the latter.

I am therefore arguing that in order to support families who *do* invest in their children's education, social benefits should be linked to school attendance. However, as children do tend to drop out, different amounts of benefits could be allocated at different educational stages (primary/secondary

education) in order to encourage their attendance. The highest dropout rate for Roma is from secondary school - so increased support is needed at this level first of all.

### *Campaigns to raise awareness*

The state is not the only actor that is able to participate in activities/programs to promote education and fight against child labor. I will argue that this process would have a more powerful impact if Roma activists created public debate related to child labor. There are, however, many reasons Roma activists might hesitate to start such a debate. First, they may fear a public backlash against Roma parents, i.e. persons who are seen as being selfish and exploitative as regards their children (as was the case with early marriage). This might stigmatize more the Roma image.

Second, activists might fear that people would 'criminalize' child labor by associating it with stereotypical images of street children and criminal networks involving Roma children (begging, stealing, prostitution, trafficking). Third, as long as there are not only Roma but also majority-population children who work (or beg, or steal, or who are involved in prostitution), why should it be Roma activists who start a debate about it?

There are many reasons, though, why Roma activists are in a better position to start a debate on Roma child labor. First of all, they may have easy access to the relevant information; and their message will have more credibility among Roma, and will be more likely to generate a change in the attitudes of the majority population via an increasing of the level of Roma participation.

To a certain extent, non-Roma are more receptive and sympathetic when a Roma child's well-being is at stake. A series of focus group meetings occurring at the beginning of the Decade underlines that "the vast majority of Romanian respondents expressed great concern for Roma children, regardless of their attitudes toward their parents. *"They may be Roma, but they are still children."* [OSI and World Bank, 2005: 12].

In these circumstances, it might be less less hazardous to use the situation of Roma children as a doorway to a more general discussion about Roma. This is not a proposal suggesting the instrumentalisation of Roma child

labor in order to achieve other goals; the suggestion is that Roma activists should not be anxious about moving forward the children's agenda. If carefully undertaken (and there are many highly educated Roma who, with a little help, could do this) such an incentive would increase receptivity and lead to a more adequate understanding of Roma.

As this last form of intervention is for the most part addressed to the majority population, the media would be the most accessible channel. A TV broadcast presenting Roma children's *own views* on poverty, education and labor may be able to raise awareness concerning the complexities of child labor. It would open a debate that might look at both cultural practices and structural constraints; and it would have the merit of showing that Roma children are not passive but are able to make sense of the world they live in and search for solutions. This could then lead the way to children's participation in public debate, which would be absolutely groundbreaking for Romania.

National television does have (even if very limited) a broadcasting space for Roma minority at prime time. If done professionally, such a project could gain a big audience; and other private televisions may employ the same strategy (even if for commercial reasons). This would also be a call for public responsibility, for many Romanian televisions have made contributions to a false understanding of Roma minorities by having a biased focus on criminality and an 'exoticisation' of Roma culture - at a time when 80% of its children live in poverty. As a TV campaign can always run the risk of creating illusive forms of activism, further interventions may then be needed (see secondary interventions).

### *Integration of cultural competency as a principle in all social services*

Cultural competency can be defined as "a set of attitudes, skills, behaviors and policies enabling individuals to establish effective interpersonal and working relationships that supersede cultural differences" [Price et al., 2005: 578]. It starts from the idea that "people should not only appreciate and recognize other cultural groups, but be able to effectively work with them" [Sue, 1998: 440]. They may take the form of guidelines for different minority

groups and helping professionals to adjust or change their practices in order to attain improved outcomes based on a deeper understanding of specific needs.

According to Kreuter et al. [2003], there are different levels of cultural competency. They start from the most peripheral ones, namely linguistic strategies (based on adapting the images and language of a program in order to make it more appealing for a specific population). At the highest level of attaining cultural competent interventions, is a process that incorporates socio-cultural elements of the targeted phenomenon, in order to reach the meaning a group is ascribing to it. This last strategy is extremely important because it is based on a higher understanding of the inner dynamic of a culture. By exploring the way Roma children understand work, family and school, for example, new ideas on how to better respond to their particular needs may emerge.

At present, cultural competency is poorly defined in Romania. A real understanding of it 'slips from one's grasp' – it ends up being one of the factors that are 'taken for granted' when working with Roma populations. Its meaning will be left to the practitioner; and there seem to be no professional attempts to bring together cultural characteristics and factors that could make intervention with the Roma more effective. At the present time, the cultural dimensions of intervention tend to be underestimated. Simple statements referring to ethic codes and a need for cultural awareness and sensitivity are not enough to explain how cultural competency is acquired, practiced and measured or to see its levels, dilemmas, etc. [see for reference Sue, 1999; Betancourt J. et al. 2003, Cohen and Matthew, 1999].

Social workers and teachers should rely not only on their own knowledge of working with Roma, on a trial and error basis. There should be a corpus of knowledge offering practice guidelines. Many skills and behaviors can be learned and attitudes can be shaped while still in education (or, for practitioners, via trainings). Consequently, there is a need to develop such socio-cultural strategies with the participation of Roma professionals. To ensure culturally competent policies, Roma should be involved in all stages of a project: from its design to implementation. They have a deeper understanding of the inner cultural dynamics involved than do non-Roma.

Based on qualitative research and literature reviews undertaken with the participation of Roma social scientists, a new corpus of knowledge on what a culturally competent intervention in education and social assistance might mean can be created. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the education of future teachers and social workers - and it will be able to introduce into curricula standards of cultural competency.

There are many dilemmas and barriers to making cultural competency a part of actual practice. One may argue that culture is diffuse, so cannot easily be put into codes of practice and standards. Yet having people work with persons belonging to a minority (especially when this relates to children) without providing any baseline knowledge of previously successful practices will be more detrimental. Practitioners are not always aware of their own biases. It may also be difficult to reconcile generalization (which ultimately leads to stereotyping) with individualization (which ends by thinking that each individual will possess different needs).

It is true that Roma children share many of the characteristics of the general population. However, there are also different cultural characteristics, which, if known, will lead to more culturally competent interventions occurring. There might be many successful experiences in working with Roma working children that otherwise remain undocumented and not part of the professional body of knowledge for those working with Roma children.

## *6.2 Secondary and tertiary level interventions*

### *Employment opportunities in communities with a high risk of exclusion and poverty*

There is a need for political will and a large-scale project which would facilitate the employment of Roma in local enterprises. One might strongly criticize such a policy: first, because in a post-communist society it may resemble the previous state strategy of creating “workplaces for Roma”; and, second, because it may overlook the idea that Roma can do much more than semi-skilled jobs.

I shall argue here that such a form of intervention would be far from limiting the options of educated Roma who have a certain freedom of choice. This paper is interested in the 80% children who live in poverty, who tend to have parents with lower levels of education, with a poor history of legal employment, higher levels of depression and who are willing to work.

Such a project will raise the living standards of Roma and the educational aspirations of children, and will improve the image of Roma - i.e. they will not be merely beneficiaries of but also contributors to the larger communities they belong to. In terms of public expenditure, it could be very cost-effective.

Ultimately, it might bring about an improved position for the Roma, so that they can then negotiate their own conditions and rights with society at large. It could lead to an increased freedom of choice - whose absence pushes children into the world of labor at the moment.

The Ministry of Work, Social Solidarity and the Family is in a position to implement such a policy. It should start by making a deprivation assessment of a neighborhood, and not of individual families. There is already a framework in place for this, and much data exists on local employment resources and levels of poverty. As this is the Ministry that distributes social benefits, so they can work to gradually turn them into *salaries*, based on the working opportunities created. Cost-benefit rates can also be easily assessed by the same administration.

### *Working with children and parents on values and norms*

In situations where a school *does* exist, but where parents do not send their children there as they ignore the value of education or see themselves as being too poor, a mobilization program might be efficient. This is being done by the MV Foundation in India, which works with parents, community leaders, local employers and teachers in order to promote new norms in the community. A new norm - that “no child should work” – has now replaced the previous acceptability of child labor. The intervention is reported to have been successful, due mainly to poor parents’ positive attitudes toward education.

*What from the MV Foundation's experiences can be transferred to Romania?*

Recent research looking at children's participation in education and successful experiences had by the MV Foundation must make us question two important assumptions. The first refers to children's passivity with regard to choices affecting their lives - and the second refers to poor parents' attitudes toward education.

The MV Foundation has demonstrated that it is worth building on parents' openness towards education and not start from the assumption that poor parents do not want their children to be educated.

As stated earlier, school and child labor are not mutually exclusive and, at least at a certain point, most child laborers did (or still do) go to school. Consequently, many interventions should take place at the time that children at the risk of entering child labor are still attending school.

Many of them have a personal and deep understanding of family poverty - and wish to find a solution. Because parents themselves have feelings of insecurity as regards education -and school as an institution - they tend to tend to give children more confidence in work, than in their education. Teachers often do have a their own understanding of child labor as a family need, and may turn a blind eye when children are absent because of "family duties". In this way, they may reinforce the message children get at home.

If trained about the causes, forms and consequences of child labor, teachers can induce changes in children's attitudes and behaviors. They could strengthen the message that school is the only window of opportunity at hand. The way this is done, though, needs to show that Roma children's socio-cultural characteristics do have a value; and this is where cultural competency intervenes.

For example, children should learn that it is good to help their parents, but school should have first priority because they will then be able to support their families more, and later in life too. This message is taking into consideration the fact that many poor Roma children may have different expectations from the educational system compared to majority population children.

At times, convincing children of the value of school may be more important than working with parents (who will tend to focus mostly on short-term economic needs).

There are situations when children may 'have a say' when it comes to their giving up school. Roma child labor does not usually have the regularity of child labor in industry or formal employment; it is more fluid, contextual and can be associated with long periods of idleness. Except with a small minority, there is usually no decisive moment when a child "starts" working and "stops going to school"<sup>40</sup>. The borderline between the world of work and that of school is explored/ negotiated sometimes for years... Consequently, what children really want does matter when it comes to school and work - and school may help them make a better choice.

Local NGOs and Roma leaders should create opportunities for Roma children and their families to get to know the success stories of young and educated Roma - who could well act as role models. In order to promote change, they should work with parents and young leaders. Involving fathers is important, too; this is, however, a relevant aspect missing from many interventions..

### *The potential for change*

Child labor is a challenging problem, but, for several reasons, there is the potential to eliminate it, both with regard to Roma and majority-population children. There are structures (e.g. governmental agencies and other organizations) that can act as forms of capital. The Decade offers a framework via which to link governmental projects from various countries, to thus address the problem of child labor in a broader context; and this could take on board the more difficult problem of child trafficking.

Moreover, owing to EU integration, issues related to the protection of children's rights are gaining some political momentum. In recent years, there

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<sup>40</sup> This is one of the reasons giving an answer to a question like "When did you start working" puzzles Roma children.



has seemed to be an increased acceptance of Roma in society as a whole (see the trend in the OSI Barometers of Public Opinion). There is a new Roma elite, one that is recognized by communities (and beyond). Many active and educated Roma leaders have a very good knowledge of their community and also sufficient skills in project management.

In Romania, Roma settlements are attached to a community and, given this fact, it will be easier to find local solutions to deal with child labor. The ghetto-ization of Roma does not yet have the dimensions that other Eastern European countries are experiencing. Child labor here does not have as high an incidence as in other parts of the developing world, for instance. Also, children are becoming more aware of their own rights [Save the Children, 2007].

The great number of qualified Roma teachers, trainers and school mediators appears to represent, perhaps, the largest potential for combating child labor. In recent years, there has also been an increasing number of Roma and non-Roma graduates in the field of Social Work. Consequently, there are reasons to believe, now, that the combating of child labor is now a realistic option.

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## Appendix

### *Acronyms*

CASPIS	National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Commission
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ILO	International Labor Organization
IPEC	International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor
NIS	National Institute of Statistics
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSI	Open Society Institute
PETI	Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
WTO	World Trade Organization